

POWER, SEX AND THE SELF: NOTES  
ON EPHESIANS 5:21-33

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Despite remarkable advances in many spheres of society, the ancient institution of marriage remains an unsolved mystery with no clear way forward. With the divorce rate historically high and a large percentage of current marriages in distress, it is no wonder that the institution itself is being refigured, reimagined and, in some societies, made redundant all together.<sup>1</sup> A parallel trend observed by sociologists concerns a sharp decline in sexual fulfillment.<sup>2</sup> Currents in sociological research suggest that the real outcome of the so-called “sexual revolution” fed by Kinseyan and Freudian ideologies has been an *increase* of sexual imagination but a *decrease* in actual fulfilling sex between real-in-the-flesh humans.<sup>3</sup> An abundance of sexual outlets creates an inverse effect in sexual well-being. Standing between issues of sexual well-being and marital fracture is Ephesians 5:21-33, a long ignored vision of marriage that can claim special insight into the relationship between these twin societal issues.

Paul’s grand vision of marriage in Ephesians 5:21-31 has a checkered past in the history of the West which has led to revisions and outright dismissal by some in the modern era. Abuses of terms such as “submission” and “headship” to justify the subjection of women have rendered this passage to be a virtual conversation stopper in many public square dialogues about marriage.<sup>4</sup> However, in this article, I shall argue that this passage provides important insights that relate directly to many of the felt issues today concerning marriage and sexual fulfillment. In the context of pastoral counseling, I have found Paul’s words to be strong enough to replace broken foundations and reasonable enough to give couples a feasible starting point. In this passage the pastor-theologian sees precisely how Paul’s thoughts are theologically profound and exceedingly practical.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. Cherlin, “American Marriage in the Early Twenty-First Century,” *FOC* (Fall: 2005): 33-55. Also see the US Department of Health and Human Services, which, over the years, has numerous initiatives to reverse this trend.

<sup>2</sup> See the American Medical Association’s study, “Sexual Dysfunction in the United States: Prevalence and Predictors” (1999): 537-544.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. Robinson, “Porn-Induced Sexual Dysfunction: A Growing Problem,” *Psychology Today* (2011). Also, see the major study by University of Sydney’s Faculty of Health Sciences in 2012 which shows the sharp decline in sexual fulfillment in younger generations because of the prevalence of pornography: <http://sydney.edu.au/news/84.html?newsstoryid=9176>

<sup>4</sup> Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, “Should Wives ‘submit graciously’? A feminist Approach to Interpreting Ephesians 5:21-33,” *Review & Expositor* 98.2 (Spring 2001): 263-276.

A concise re-examination of the Apostle's unique vision is called for even though we proceed with caution knowing from history that potential pitfalls abound.

My conversation partners for this short study are Harold W. Hoehner and John Paul II. While on the surface these two scholars have very little in common (Hoehner, a long-time New Testament Professor at *Dallas Theological Seminary* and John Paul II serving as head of the Catholic Church), both of their crowning intellectual achievements overlap precisely on the topic at hand. Hoehner's commentary on Ephesians is a massive twenty-year labor of love that offers an unrivaled and relentless historical-grammatical analysis of the text.<sup>5</sup> John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* stands as the final summary of his life's work as a philosopher and a clergyman.<sup>6</sup> As he approaches Ephesians, and chapter five in particular, he does so as one who has reached the peak, not just of Paul's thinking, but indeed the "summa" of the story of Scripture itself. At this summit he finds the mysterious intersection between divine love and authentic human love pictured in the *physical* love between a husband and a wife.

The theological scope of Ephesians is difficult to overstate. Paul quickly employs cosmic language that history itself is marching toward a climatic point in time in which "heaven and earth" are to be united "in him" (Eph. 1:10). It is a healing and restoration of the physical world in which all living creatures find themselves within the range of God's redemption. This redemption brings the dead to life (Eph. 2), is displayed in the church (Eph. 3), and brings together diverse "members" into a single identifiable body (Eph. 4). However, Paul moves to answer a more pragmatic question about how ordinary unbelievers can know this cosmic activity. The second half of the letter is dedicated to this question, and the climax of the answer is found in his discussion of the relationship between husbands and wives.

Among all the important interpersonal relationships noted in Paul's letter, the relationship between husbands and wives is given the added weight of direct gospel correlatives. It is in the context of the marriage relationship that God's plan of salvation is displayed as a living-in-the-flesh drama for all to see. By a husband's loving behavior towards his wife, outsiders see the love of Christ to the church (Eph. 5:25). By the wife's response to the husband, outsiders see the response of the church to the sacrifice of Christ (Eph. 5:24). In this way the gospel is expressed on the stage of day-to-day life. Hence for Paul, marriage between man and wife is the local touch-point in which the grand cosmic themes of Ephesians are practically experienced and "witnessed" in the context of the mundane.

John Paul II sees Ephesians as having two major lines of thought: the first "is the mystery of Christ, which is realized in the church as an

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<sup>5</sup> Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media, 2006). Hereafter cited as TOB.

expression of the divine plan for man's salvation."<sup>7</sup> The second is "the Christian vocation as the model of life of baptized persons and particular communities, corresponding to the mystery of Christ or to the divine plan for the salvation of man."<sup>8</sup> John Paul II reads Ephesians 5:21-33 as standing at the intersection of these two ideas. Indeed, these verses are not simply the linchpin of Ephesians but "the crowning of the themes and truths that ebb and flow like long waves through the Word of God revealed in Sacred Scripture."<sup>9</sup>

For John Paul II the embodied person is sacramental, that is, a visible sign of an invisible reality. This sacrament was expressed ultimately when God himself became a man through the incarnation. It is in the relationship between man and woman that the notion of gift-through-incarnation can be fully expressed and experienced.<sup>10</sup> In this way the imperative of Paul to "be imitators of God" (Eph. 5:1-2) can find its full meaning: just as God showed his self-giving love by the incarnation, so too the calling of humanity is to follow that example and give of oneself *in the flesh* to each other as a gift.

For Hoehner, Ephesians represents the "quintessence" of Paul's thought expressed through a trinitarian vision of the Father,<sup>11</sup> the Son,<sup>12</sup> and the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup> He divides the book into two parts: the calling of the church (1:1-3:21) and the conduct of the church (4:1-6:24). For Hoehner, Paul's vision of marriage falls within a more ethical-moral category than that of an overarching theological one. Paul's vision of marriage is more in line with how believers "are able to please the Lord by fulfilling their duties and are able to live blameless lives in close and continual contact with their family."<sup>14</sup> However, the purpose of this marital ethic had a missional edge: it "was to display to the Roman world how believers who are transformed and empowered by the Holy Spirit function within the family structure."<sup>15</sup>

With these overviews conducted, we will now make some observations about the text itself regarding power dynamics and sex in marriage.

## I. POWER DYNAMICS

There is a history of using the notion of submission and headship as a power play in marriage that positions husbands at an advantage over their wives. But in v. 21 Paul provides an overarching power dynamic to the relationship between a husband and wife: "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." This overshadows the entire section.

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<sup>7</sup> TOB, 471.

<sup>8</sup> TOB, 471.

<sup>9</sup> TOB, 467. -

<sup>10</sup> TOB, 468.

<sup>11</sup> Eph. 1:4-14, 17; 2:18, 22; 3:4-5, 14-17; 4:4-6; 5:18-26.

<sup>12</sup> Eph. 1:6, 13, 17; 4:13, 4:20-21.

<sup>13</sup> Eph. 1:13, 2:18, 22; 4:30; 5:18; 6:18.

<sup>14</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 729.

<sup>15</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 727.

Verse 21 both concludes the preceding section (beginning at verse 15) and sets the stage for Paul's discussion of marriage and other household relationships.<sup>16</sup> The previous section is an exhortation to be "filled with the Spirit" so as to be under his control and influence. Hence Paul's thought process is that the Spirit empowers and energizes the ability to achieve the actions commanded in verses 21-33. It is also worth pointing out that mutual submission is mentioned strictly within the context of being under control of the Spirit. Furthermore, υποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλοις is the sort of Spirit-filled submission that is in view in verse 22 regarding submission of wives to husbands.

Verse 21 also makes a statement regarding the role of fear in marriage. This husband and wife relationship does indeed have fear but not toward each other. Rather, it is actualized by the power of the Spirit and overseen by an ever-present fear of Christ (φόβω Χριστοῦ). In this marriage relationship it is the thoughts and opinions of Christ that superintend the desires of both the husband and the wife. Paul interjects a "not my will, but yours be done" quality to this whole passage which renders both husband and wife looking to Christ as their ultimate authority. This observation is important because discussions about marriage and sex often drift into issues of individual rights and personal satisfaction. Paul here shows that marriage is, in effect, not solely about the husband and wife, but about the will and desire of Jesus. With this piece in place, Paul then moves to the dynamics between husbands and wives.

## II. HEAD AND BODY

In v. 23 Paul introduces a notion of headship in which a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church. Even though the exact connotations of this term are not fully understood, most agree that the husband ultimately expresses his headship by being a protective covering for his wife in giving up his own life to save, benefit, and protect the life of his wife. As Christ showed his headship of the church by giving up himself on the cross for her, so to the husband is the head of his wife by giving up himself to benefit his wife. Thus, headship and the act of loving one's wife are directly related. In verse 28, Paul instructs that "husbands should love their wives as their own bodies." This reinforces the connection between love and the head/body metaphor. Hoehner points out that the verb *ἀφείλουσιν* which is followed by the infinitive directs back to the main point of v. 25 which is that husbands are "free agents" to love their wives regardless of how the wife is treating the husband.<sup>17</sup>

But in what way is the husband here to love his wife? In answering this question the connection between marriage and sex may be seen in a different and helpful light. Paul says that the husband is to love his wife as his own body. Hoehner suggests that Paul means "husbands are to love their wives 'as being' their own bodies."<sup>18</sup> He notes that "throughout the

<sup>16</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 729.

<sup>17</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 764.

<sup>18</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 764.

context the head corresponds to the body and the head, Christ, loves the body, the church; so also husbands ought to love their wives who, as it were, are their own bodies.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, as Hoehner continues in his explanation he says this:

It is to make clear that the preceding phrase is not intended to focus on a person’s love of his own physical body. Rather, the focus is directed on the extent of love a husband should have for his wife, that is, the same way that Christ loved the church. This love is not to be seen as a duty but as something that is consistent with his nature, as he does not think about loving himself because it is natural, so also, should the husband’s love of his wife be something that is as natural as loving himself.

To this, I agree. Indeed, it seems to me that he doesn’t go far enough. Paul’s focus is precisely the transfer of the “person’s love of this own physical body” to of the physical, bodily needs of his wife. It is not just the “extent” of love but the bodily transfer in which the husband functions, in a strange sense, as the literal head for his wife’s body. Paul’s idea is that the husband endeavors to function as if he is the actual head of his wife’s body. Just as a husband is in tune with the needs of his body because it is attached to his head and can communicate to his body what it needs, the idea is that husbands are to be a head for their wives’ bodies and therefore be in tune with the physical needs of their wives and thus address those needs in ways fitting for the wives. It is almost as if Paul wishes husbands to envision a sort of Frankenstein image in which a husband’s head is attached to the body of his wife. There is a literalness in which the husband’s head functions and responds to the physical body of his wife as if his head were attached to his wife’s body.

If Paul has in mind a more literal head/body concept, then all the physical needs of the wife, including sexual, would be included. The husband knows how to physically love his wife in a way that perfectly fitting *for her* because he is her head. If this is the case, then this may be a filling out of Paul’s teaching on sex in 1 Corinthians 7:4 that “the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.” The idea would be that person’s sexual organs are *for* the spouse in that their sexuality is designed to be given to each other as a gift fitting for each spouse’s body.

### III. NOURISHING AND CHERISHING

The means by which one loves the other is by “nourishing” and “cherishing” the flesh of the other. These two terms are very fleshly in scope in that they are specialized terms that refer to the physical care and well-being of another. The first term, ἐκτρέφει, refers to the physical raising up of children (cf. Eph. 6:4). It is a term taken “from language of

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<sup>19</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 765.

the nursery...charged with affection.”<sup>20</sup> Josephus used this term to refer to those who care diligently for gardens so that they will produce fruit,<sup>21</sup> and for others who care for animals as if the animals themselves were gods.<sup>22</sup> In each case this term carries with it a physical caring for another so that the other is enabled to thrive and experience the fullest life possible.

The second term *θάλπει* literally means to “heat up” or “to be inflamed.” It was used by Paul to describe the tender warmth experienced between a breast-feeding mother and her infant (1 Thess. 2:7). Philo used this term to describe what clothes provide for human flesh: warmth and protection.<sup>23</sup> So in this case the head cares for the body for heating it up in a way suitable for the needs it has.

So what does it mean that the head (husband) is physically attentive to the body (wife)? John Paul II suggests that this act of physical love is itself the confirmation of re-orienting *one's self* in another person. He puts it this way:

In some sense, love makes the “I” of another person one’s own “I”: the wife’s I, I would say, becomes through love the husband’s “I”. The body is the expression of this “I” and the foundation of its identity. The union of husband and wife in love expresses itself also through the body...In union through love, the body “of the other” becomes “one’s own” in the sense that one is moved by concern for the good of the body of the other as for one’s own. One might say the above-mentioned words, which characterize the “bodily” love that should unite the spouses, express the most general and, at the same time, most essential content.<sup>24</sup>

It is in this notion of loving the other as one’s self that John Paul’s particular body theology can be seen, in the “other” orientation that moves one not just to love but to actually find one’s “self” which, until the gift was given, was never truly known. That is, it is only in giving oneself to another that anyone can understand one’s own self. In this way man is not a truly autonomous creature but only emerges in authenticity within the context of giving the “I” to another. As Jewitt states, “Man, as created in the divine image, is Man-in-fellowship...the primary form of this fellowship is that of male and female.”<sup>25</sup>

## CONCLUSION

When Paul quoted Genesis 2:24, “two become one flesh” (Eph. 5:31), he intertwined the meaning of the body with the plan of God. Two being one flesh is a biblical notion of holistic, emotional, spiritual, sexual

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<sup>20</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 766.

<sup>21</sup> Josephus, *War*, 4:467

<sup>22</sup> Josephus, *Apion*, 2:139

<sup>23</sup> *Names* 246; *Dreams* 2:52; *Deca* 77.

<sup>24</sup> TOB, 485-486.

<sup>25</sup> P. K. Jewitt, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 45-46, quoted in Judith Balswick and Jack Balswick, *Authentic Human Sexuality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 61.

union between a husband and wife that reaches back before the fall (Gen 2:24) and was affirmed by Jesus (Matt 19:6) as God's continued idea for marriage. When Paul proclaims that it refers mysteriously to Christ and church he infuses meaning in the human body and the incarnation of Jesus that is difficult to describe because it is just too wonderful.

Today, however, for almost everyone who experiences "one flesh," it is hard to imagine that it points to a divinely instituted event. Sex has become a means by which individuals become self-gratified. Indeed, with the explosion of today's sex industry, one's partner is becoming more and more redundant. Paul's words in Ephesians 5 remind us that the essence of sex is something that is fundamentally self-giving, not self-receiving. His head/body imagery shows that sex is a means by which husbands serve their wives for the benefit of their wives, not use them as a tool to satisfy an urge. And in doing this, the act of sex becomes something much more than satisfying. It becomes a way to discover anew who one really is.